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CHAPTER SEVEN

805 527 ROUND about the end of January each year, for our lunar dates do not fall on the same calendar dates every year, we celebrated my father's birthday. All Burmese celebrations have a basis of "doing merit" either in feasting people and perhaps fasting oneself, distributing gifts, or inviting monks to preach and others to hear them. An atmosphere of enjoyment is possible in these good works because Burmese people do not believe in divorcing their praying from their merry-making; usually both are carried out in the same room, the pleasure after the holiness; and the donor feels a great satisfaction of spirit as he says; "*A-hmya a-hmya* : Share with all, share with all (the merit from his good deed)." The friends gathered around reply to this "*Tha-du, tha-du :* Well done, well done."

527 352 On my father's birthday monks were "lifted" or invited to the house for a grand meal. All the Western chairs and tables were moved out of the sitting room; and one end of the room was laid with carpets of red and green rose design, specially kept for such occasions in all Burmese houses. This was for the monks to sit on and facing them the people would sit on mats. Between the monks and people were laid out all the presents for the monastery.

792 •192 [431] I was always sad when I saw these presents; to my childish eyes they looked so uninteresting. A monk who renounces worldly goods is allowed to possess only eight articles, three pieces of cloth which form his robes, a begging bowl, a mat, a blade, a needle and a water strainer. Dagas or donators can, therefore, only give these, or other articles necessary to the way of life conforming to their precepts. Such include religious books, mats, candles and matches, brooms, spittoons. These last make very elegant presents, and are a common sight at all distributions of presents, the standard pattern being of white enamel, with a red band around the edge. Children are told of one monastry whose holiness is so high that a spittoon donated to the monks there will echo the name of the donator each time a monk spits into it. With the presents all laid out, the monks walk in in a row, and sit with eyes downcast and legs crossed. My mother and father make obeisance to them and send for us after a few words with the chief monk. We were always nervous and subdued on these occasions; in speaking to a monk a vocabulary of honorifics has to be used, even for "Yes". The hpongyi always made

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joking enquiries about whether we were getting enough Buddhist and Burmese teaching for we were attending English Christian schools at the time.

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The monks have lost all touch with the schooling of the great majority of children by now. In the first decade of the century the monastic schools were still the backbone of instruction for boys throughout all the rural districts, being responsible for the high literacy figure of 49% for Burman males, as compared with 11.9% in Madras at the time. But lay schools, either established and run on Burman lines, or established by Christian missionary societies with perhaps grants-in-aid, or under the direct management of Government or a committee acting on behalf of the government, were springing up on all sides, until by 1934 the proportion of lay to recognized monastic schools for vernacular education was about five to one. Although there had been attempts to raise the utilitarian value of monastic education by the encouragement of such subjects as arithmetic, geography and land surveying, it was far easier for the lay schools to conform to the standards set by the Board of Examiners. With the passing of such standards becoming the means of obtaining employment and the changing of fashions, more and more children went to the lay schools. Moreover, the lay schools included schools for girls, either separately or in common with boys.

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In my childhood there were still echoes of the opposition between monastic and secular education. In about 1922 my Uncle Pyant, who was then a serious student at the University, told me the world was round, "but", he added, "the hpongyis say that this is not true and most elder people don't believe it." My husband also tells me that when he went home from his government school with the statement that the earth spun around on its axis and took twenty-four hours to do it, the elders were most scornful. "In that case," they said, "if you were to go up into the air and stay there for some time, you could not come down to Kengtung until the same time the next day, but might land in England for your lunch."

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Another difference between old and new ideas of education was that the elder people were aghast at the long years which a modern education from primary schools to University lasted. They felt that at least one must have learnt everything there was to learn by then, for a few years at a monastery taught a boy all the reading, writing, calculation and literature which any grown man was expected to know. Once my grandfather received a telegram announcing the birth of a grandson; the message contained the additional information that the doctors had found it necessary to perform a circumcision on the infant. The telegram was in English, according to the rules of the Posts and Telegraphs in Burma,

177. brother to his young sisters, and thus give joy to the whole family.
57 "For," said she, "our family has always commanded respect. Grandfather
873 was a great man, and you are the only son of the youngest family of his
grandchildren, and it should not be said that with us the end tapers to a
186 point," which is the expression for a stock which degenerates with
582 successive generations.

In the case of a girl, there was not of course, the fear that she would bring back an English husband, but the concern that Burmese standards of morality and dignity would be affected by an unchaperoned stay in a foreign country was very great. As we landed, I remembered enough of my childhood environment to feel the eyes of elder relatives and friends on me while I tried to restrain the wild excitement and love I felt at seeing again my mother and my young sisters now grown so sweet and shy, and I noticed also that my brother had been home long enough not to kiss me in front of my aunts as he had done when he himself had first returned from England. I felt this scrutiny also when my mother took me on the round of obeisance visits during my first days at home, and it formed a complement to the visit which I had paid to each of these elder relatives and friends before I left for England three years before. Then, each had given me a lecture which contained strong injunctions to keep to the path of virtue, modesty and dignity. But these were just *son-ma saga*, admonitory words, to be received with meekness, and not a slight on the strength of my character, just as now, when, satisfied with their scrutiny, they told my mother that her womb should be layered
• 192] with gold leaf (sacrilegiously using the term for the gilding of sacred objects) for having brought forth such daughters, I was not expected to take conceit.

In all the houses of friends in Rangoon, in Thaton and Ye, I went
192 through the same ritual, but the words of the hpongyi at Thaton moved
186 me more than any other. "Now I will tell three stories about Mi Mi Khaing," he said, and proceeded in beautiful words and a chanting flow; "You are like a young tree planted of good seed in the fertile earth. Now the tree is heavy with ripe fruit, but the boughs are tender and bend under the weight. The tree must grow carefully and steadily, so that the full fruit do not break the young bough.....Let your stature be measured by your shadow that is cast after the noonday sun, for your knowledge and learning are now at noonday height. So your shadow will grow longer and longer towards the setting of the day.....Let your merit be like a river that gathers more strength from the rain that falls about it, and grows from a stream into a great river before it joins the mighty Thammodhaya." Then he took the monk's expression off his face, and turned to me with a smile and asked in a normal speaking

voice, "Do you understand the hpongyi's language after being so long as it were one human amongst a thousand monkeys?"

Chastened and fortified by such injunctions, I was ready to plunge into six months of social life before starting on the serious business of earning a living. Rangoon should have offered plenty of scope for that, according to the rhyme about the first three cities of Burma: *"Moul-a-myaing a-sa, Mandalay sa-ga, Yangon a-kywa:* Moulmein for rich eating, Mandalay for fine speaking, Rangoon for showy vanity."

The Yangon-thu were grouped in urban or verdant clusters about the city of foreigners. There were two packed streets of the more prosperous trading classes in a western quarter of Rangoon, which the municipal authorities called Edward Street and Oliphant Street, but which to every Burman had always been known as *Kon-zay Dan:* Goods Bazaar Row, and *Shwedaung Dan:* Gold Mountain Row. Here the families lived in tightly packed unpretentious houses and did not possess Western style furniture or cars; they went to the cinema in rickshaws, but the women were loaded with valuable diamond jewellery which put many a minkadaw to shame. In the dusk of the evenings, they sat on wooden platform couches on the pavement outside each house, puffing at cheroots, calling out to neighbours and eating a variety of choice foods from the Burmese, Chinese and Indian restaurant quarter which surrounded them. In the east of the town, separated from this area by rows of Indian and mixed streets, retired Government officers were concentrated in a block. Here the houses were substantial, the sons and daughters attended school and University in cars, and the most eligible civil servants could be obtained in marriage for daughters, but the pensioners were the type who lived in a congested neighbourhood for fear of dacoits in a more open area, and whose womenfolk considered lawns and the drawing-rooms of modern bungalows a poor substitute for the access to cinema, eating houses and bazaars that a crowded part of Rangoon afforded them. Round about the Kokine Lakes and along the main highway to Prome, however, more newly retired Burmans who entertained on chairs, laid rugs on floors and hung pictures on walls in the Western fashion, had built pleasant modern bungalows. To the west of this area, just a stone's throw from the main Prome Road, began the village of Kemmendine with its rows of small wooden houses, each with its front enclosure full of green foliage, an altar-stand jutting out on the east wall, three steps raising the first and only storey a few feet off the ground, and wooden floors with one plank loose in them to allow the dust to be swept below. Kemmendine had its own bazaar, country boats on the river, and children and dogs playing on the street, just like any district town. My *Ko Gyi*, eldest male first cousin, lived there among small traders, clerks and school

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1. Datu zedi, erected over relics of the Buddha, or models of these.

2. Paribawga zedi, over the sacred eight utensils, or their imitations.

3. Oddeitha zedi, enclosing images.

4. Damma zedi, enclosing the sacred books, such as the *Bitaghat thôn-bôn*, the three baskets of the Law, and other sacred volumes, like the *Bagawa*, appointed to be read during Lent.

It may be well to remark that the word "pagoda" is not known at all in Burmese, either in its English or Cinghalese form, any more than the word Mandarin is known in China. Such a building is called a Zedi, from the Pali chaitya, meaning the offering-place, or place of prayer, but the expression Payā, applicable as well to the image as to the shrine, is most frequently used in reference to the more famous centres of worship.

The greatest of the payās, such as the Shwe Dagôn in Rangoon, the most famous of all; the Shwe Maw-daw, the lotus-shrine of Pegu; the Shwe San-daw, the depository of the sacred hair at Prome; and the Mahā Myat Muni, the temple of the most exalted saint in Mandalay; all these were founded by single individuals, or brothers to whom the most excellent Master had given hairs from his head to deposit in the specified place. How the exact spot was found, and how successive kings increased the size of the first erection, and donations flowed in from the pious in all parts of the world to beautify and preserve the building, all these particulars are recorded in the palm-leaf records of the various temples. Many later Zedi, however, have been erected by villages, or by public subscription in whole districts, as pious memorials, or to commemorate some particular event, as well as for the obvious purposes of public convenience on the duty days of the month. Very many, and among them some of the most beautiful, are, on the other hand, the outcome of purely individual desire for merit. Some, such as the chaste, white Sibyo shrine at Mengôn, near Mandalay, are built in remembrance of individuals; the graceful pagoda mentioned being erected by a recent monarch in memory of a favourite queen. Under all, however, to render

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/For lists of kinship terms, and for excellent and detailed information concerning correlations between kinship terminology, patterns of behavior, and social institutions, see category 601./